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SUBJECT: Ambassador Advocates for U.S. Interests and Mosque with
Minister of Education Diamantopoulou

CLASSIFIED BY: Daniel Speckhard, Ambassador, State, Exec; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a December 17 call on Minister of Education and Religious Affairs Anna Diamantopoulou, Ambassador Speckhard lobbied for American educational institutions operating in Greece, specifically with regard to licensing, recognition of degrees and the granting of vocational rights for graduates. The Ambassador also strongly urged the GOG to live up to its commitment to establish at least one mosque in Athens. Diamantopoulou reiterated the position that the Greek Constitution stipulates that only Greek state institutions could be licensed as universities. However, the GOG is willing to grant professional rights (such as being hired by the public sector) to graduates of qualified institutions provided that they became affiliated with EU institutions of higher education. Diamantopoulou said that plans were in the works for several mosques in Athens, not just one, to accommodate Muslims of different sects. The Ambassador and Diamantopoulou also discussed higher educational reform and the role that the U.S. could play in facilitating these efforts, as well as meetings we could arrange during her planned visit to the U.S. in April 2010. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Although her portfolio also covers religious affairs, Diamantopoulou stated that she spent 95% of her time on educational matters. She criticized past educational reform efforts as being too short term and too focused to make a real difference, meaning that long term reforms never saw fruition. Each government wanted to see immediate results such as changing the way students are accepted to universities without taking into account that primary and secondary education would have to be reformed as part of this process. Real reform would involve changing the institutional framework, changing the teacher mentality, and decentralizing the educational system. On the latter point, Diamantopoulou noted that even routine changes in a small provincial schools required central Ministry approval.

¶3. (C) On the issue of granting licenses to U.S.-affiliated schools operating in Greece, Ambassador Speckhard pushed strongly for licensing of Anatolia College, which has been in Greece since 1923, and Deree College, operating since 1875 - and for the GOG to recognize their degrees. In addition to providing sough-after, high-quality American education in Greece, these schools also provide hundreds of jobs to Greeks (only 7% of the staff in Deree College is non-Greek and 10% in Anatolia), the Ambassador noted. Diamantopoulou stated that the Greek Constitution explicitly forbids the operation of private universities in Greece, stating specifically that universities in Greece must be free and run by the state. She added that a change to the constitution would exact a cost not only in time (at least five years) but politically as well, since initiating such a controversial move would engender such social unrest that it could potentially split the ruling PASOK party in two. As an example of how controversial the issue of private higher education is, Diamantopoulou noted that the appointment of Thalia Dragona as Special Secretary in the Ministry has caused quite a stir because she graduated from Deree College, and therefore does not have a recognized Greek degree. According to Diamantopoulou, sentiments within the Greek university system lie so firmly against the establishment of private universities

that when a university professor quit to become Dean of New York College in Athens, he was ostracized by the Greek university community.

¶4. (C) Diamantopoulou stated that under the present constitution it is impossible for Deree College or even affiliates of EU universities to have their degrees recognized, meaning that graduates from these institutions cannot apply for graduate studies in Greek universities. There is a process for recognition of degrees for students from universities in the U.S. For example, provided that the students took classes in the U.S. and not in Greece. There is more flexibility on the issue of professional rights, she stated, since the GOG is under EU pressure and will allow graduates of franchises of EU universities to be hired by the public sector even if they studied only in Greece. The only way a graduate of Deree College could be hired by the public sector would be for Deree College to become affiliated with an EU university (as Anatolia has done). In the coming weeks, an accreditation body will be set up under the Ministry of Education, made up of academics, to determine which foreign institutions will receive operating licenses. The Ambassador stated that it was unfortunate that a quality institution such as Deree College might be forced to compromise its American identity to widen the hiring options for its graduates.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador also argued for the granting of tax concessions for American colleges operating in Greece as non-profit organizations and for relaxation of visa restrictions to allow American students to stay for the duration of their courses, which often extend beyond the 90-day visa limit. Ambassador Speckhard also described the advantages to Greece of allowing selected American teachers to stay for up to three years to provide

effective English instruction, for example, and urged the GOG to review visa cases for these teachers on a flexible basis.

¶6. (C) Finally, Ambassador Speckhard urged the GOG to live up to its commitment to establish a mosque in Athens, a city of 5,000,000 with no legal house of worship for the Muslim community. The Ambassador stated that doing so would be proof to the international community of Greece's support for religious freedom. Land owned by the Greek Navy had been identified as a site for a mosque, but the process appeared to be stuck. Diamantopoulou stated that Greece was planning to open several mosques to meet the needs of different sects, rather than to have only one mosque serving the whole city of Athens. This approach would also address the problem of the current 700 illegal places of worship for Muslims that exist in Athens. A large site had already been identified in Elefsina with plans for a 600 square meter mosque. The Greek Archbishop himself had also donated land to be used as a mosque.

¶7. (C) In response to the Ambassador's offer of assistance in the educational sector, Diamantopoulou stated that the university teachers' union, POSDEP, which has begun to soften its rhetoric and demonstrate a more moderate and progressive approach, is working with the Ministry on Educational reform. The union will initiate the reforms and the Ministry will support them. The Ambassador offered assistance in this area as well as in the area of accreditation if needed. The Minister mentioned that she planned on visiting the U.S. in late-March/early April to coincide with Greek Independence Day and may seek assistance in setting up meetings with counterparts in the education field. At the Ambassador's request, Diamantopoulou promised to arrange meetings for the President of Deree College with the Deputy Minister of Education after the holidays.

¶8. (C) Comment: Although Diamantopoulou is an impressive and expert interlocutor in the field of education, her government's present policy represents a significant step backward from the previous New Democracy government as far as U.S. institutions of higher education -- and their graduates -- are concerned. A few days before leaving office, the New Democracy government gave licenses to 33 foreign colleges to function as institutions of higher education. The New Democracy Ministry had also outlined a process for recognition of degrees from U.S. colleges as long as they were accredited in the U.S. The present government has adopted a narrow legalistic barrier using the Greek constitution as

the reason for avoiding contentious issues of recognition of foreign institutions of higher education in Greece, despite the fact that these institutions have educated tens of thousands of Greek professionals. The good news is that elite institutions such as Deree College and Anatolia College will be treated the same as other foreign colleges operating in Greece. The bad news is that all will be barred from having their degrees recognized by Greece. Our conversation with the Minister underlined once again how difficult it is in Greece to institute meaningful reform. A university system which remains closed to foreign innovations and hostage to syndicate interests will fall further behind those in other countries more open to global innovations. Rather than adopting a forward leaning posture encouraging the Ministry to incorporate American institutions of higher education into the Greek system, we may need to guard against further incursions into the autonomy of quality American institutions of higher education in Greece.

Speckhard